

U.S. - Russia: Shoulder to Shoulder on Terrorism

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Much like the United States after 9-11, Russia is radically re-thinking how it intends to combat terrorism in the wake of the Beslan hostage tragedy. In recent days, the Kremlin has announced that it will now pursue a policy of "preemption" to attack terrorist organizations beyond Russia's borders, undertake a significant overhaul of the security forces, redefine its domestic political order, as well as increase cooperation with America's fight against global terrorism.

Russia's "9-11"

Russia's Defense Minister Sergei Ivanov calls the slaughter of more than 330 people, mostly children, in the small North Ossetia town of Beslan Russia's "Sept. 11." In a nationally televised interview on Sunday, he made it clear that Russia's response to the hostage crisis will be as profound as the shock Russians and most of the world are still experiencing.

It is significant that Ivanov was tapped to present the Kremlin's new political course. As head of the Defense Ministry, he has long been at loggerheads with Soviet-era generals and the enormous corruption associated with their military service –the same former Soviet generals who continue to distrust the United States and much of the Western world. In recent months the general staff has been shaken-up, though by Ivanov's own admission much work must be done to make Russia's armed forces leaner and more mobile to confront modern threats like terrorism.

First strike

The most important change is Russia's right to preempt, using forces available with exception of nuclear weapons, terrorists and their organizations anywhere in the world when it sees fit. This is a significant policy reversal. The concept of preemption was the Kremlin's strongest argument against the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003, claiming a United National Security Council resolution was necessary before any unilateral use of force against a foreign country. For all intents and purposes, Russia has now adopted America's policy approach when dealing with international terrorism and use of its military abroad.

It has long been believed that Russia, due to its former ties to the Arab world during the Soviet period, maintains extensive networks in countries that materially and financially support terrorists groups. What were Soviet allies may now become targets of Russian preemptive strikes. Not only will the US support such a policy, it will also welcome an ally willing to act unilaterally when necessary.

Gearing up the state

A day after the hostage crisis, Vladimir Putin roundly criticized the performance of the security forces. He cited poor performance among these agencies as the same malady plaguing the military - corruption and incompetence. Essentially promising an overhaul of what used to be the KGB, Putin on September 13 fired North Ossetia's interior minister and regional head of the FSB (primary successor of the KGB), the position tasked to oversee anti-terrorist efforts.

Signaling he understands the extreme importance of Russia's southern flank, Putin also today appointed Dmitry Kozak - formerly of the presidential administration - to head up the Southern Federal District, replacing the disgraced former St. Petersburg Governor Vladimir Yakovlev. Kozak is widely seen as a Putin loyalist as well as a person of unusual professional competence.

Many more changes in the security forces should be expected. Speaking to a joint session of government on September 13, Putin stated, "The country's state authority must not be merely adapted to work in crisis situations. The mechanisms of its work should be radically reviewed in order to prevent crises." These are not mere words - Putin has ordered passage of legislation that will essentially assure only Kremlin appointees will be elected to parliament and regional governorships.

During an extraordinary meeting with the cabinet of ministers, security officials, and regional governors, Putin on September 13 proposed a radical restructuring of the country's democratic structures that will change how the Russia national and regional legislatures are elected. Changes which have nothing to do with democracy, instead focused on ending what little autonomy the regions possess after five years of Putin's presidency.

Putin proposes that the lower house of parliament, the State Duma, move to full proportional representation. At present, 50 percent of seats are elected proportionally, the balance elected in single mandate districts. Putin also has requested that direct popular election of regional governors come to an end. Moving forward, the Kremlin will recommend candidates to be voted on in respective regional legislatures. As undemocratic as this sounds, Putin is now determined to focus all the state's resources against internal and external threats.

Russia political class looks to the US

Another important change in Kremlin outlook is how it sees the United States as a partner in the war against international terrorism. Ivanov commented, "The Americans and the U.S. military have a better understanding of the seriousness of this threat since we and the United States have both been targeted in powerful attacks." He went on to say, "In that sense, it has been easier for us to find a basis for mutual understanding with the United States than with some of the European nations."

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Ivanov's words suggest nothing less than an anti-terrorist alliance with the United States. Since America's 9-11, both countries have been moving in the direction - irrespective of differences concerning the invasion and occupation of Iraq. A strong indication of how serious Russia is in sealing a deal with United States will present itself when the United Nations will decide on an international anti-terrorism treaty.

The United States and Russia have much in common when it comes to combating international terrorism. Both are now bent on destroying terrorist training camps and the financial sources that fund terrorist networks. Both have the military means, though Russia needs to step-up modernization of its armed forces to ensure that its new tough talk on terrorism is followed with actions.

Both the United States and Russia appear to be on the same page when comes to confronting terrorism. Expressing his condolences to the Russian people, President George W. Bush stated the United States stands "shoulder-to-shoulder" with Russia in the war on terrorism. While the US State Department has been critical of Russia handling of the ongoing conflict in Chechnya, State Department spokesman Richard Boucher described the hostage crisis in Beslan as "an issue of international terrorism," adding that "We don't link the political settlement [with Chechen separatists] with acts of terror. We're absolutely firm condemning these acts of terror and standing with the Russian government in fighting terrorism." These are words Putin and Ivanov certainly welcome.

An alliance in the making

However, for a meaningful alliance between the two countries to become a reality, Putin needs to assure its new ally that he has his own house in order. Over the past few days, words about the need to re-tool Russia's military and security forces have been followed up with some actions. In the meantime, Putin has the enormous task of convincing his own people they will be safe at home before he can prove to the world Russia will be at the frontline preventing terrorism.

For the United States, the heavy burden of fighting international terrorism, irrespective of the Bush Administration's Iraq policies, Russia's participation in what is called the "coalition of the willing" can take on a completely new meaning. With almost 500 Russian killed because of terrorist acts in the last month, the United States and the world will not have wait long to see a new and formable international actor takes issues into its new hands.

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